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Mariusz Mielczarek

CATAPHRACTS — A PARTHIAN ELEMENT IN THE SELEUCID ART OF WAR

In the 2nd century B.C. important changes in the Seleucid art of war are visible. On the one hand, the Romanization of the tactics, organization and military equipment of the Seleucid army took place, especially after 168.¹ On the other, the experience of Antiochus III's eastern campaign bore fruit in the acceptance of some eastern elements into Seleucid military practice. Among these elements can be placed the heavy armoured cavalry named cataphracts. Of all the armies of Hellenistic rulers the cataphracts are documented only in the Seleucid army.

Livy's reference to the presence in Antiochus III's army of horsemen which he terms cataphracts (Livy 35.48, 37.40) constitutes the first reference to the employment of this type of heavy armoured cavalry by the Seleucids. At Magnesia,² 3000 cataphracts were placed on each wing of Antiochus III's army (Livy 37.40). Thus in Livy's account (37.40) the Seleucid cataphracts are represented as already well organized and relatively numerous formation. The course of the above mentioned battle,³ especially the events on the left wing of the Antiochus III's army, indicate that the horsemen were well trained.

There is no evidence that cataphracts were present in the Seleucid army before Antiochus III's reign. Accordingly, he should be credited with this innovation, which in all probability should be linked with his eastern expedition in 210–206 B.C. and with the experience gained during battles with the eastern enemy, above all the Parthians.⁴ The introduction of these cataphracts into Antiochus' army may have occurred during or shortly after the campaign, yet it certainly took place before 195 B.C., and an earlier date – before 200 B.C. – is still possible. The *κατάφρακτοι ἵπποι* who fought at Panion and are mentioned by Polybius (16.18), familiar with military matters and with the meaning of the term cataphract (indicated by his description of the Daphne parade – Polyb. 30.25 [Büttner-Wobst]), may be regarded as the first indication that a new cavalry unit had been created in the Seleucid army.⁵ However Polybius' account (Polyb. 16.18) is not precise enough to allow us certainly in this matter.

¹ Polyb. 30.25 [Büttner-Wobst] – 5000 soldiers armed in the Roman style at Daphne. See Bar-Kochva 1976; Sekunda 1994.

² App., *Syr.* 32; Florus 1.24. On the battle: Bar-Kochva 1976: 164–73.

³ App., *Syr.* 32. Appian questions the tactics of Antiochus III, commenting that the Syrian king set his hopes on cavalry, and against all rules deprived the phalanx of its leading role on the battlefield of Magnesia.

⁴ Cf. Iul. Val., *Alex. Mac.* 1.35 [Kaebler]. See Tarn 1930: 76; Bar-Kochva 1976: 75; Michalak 1987: 75. Also Schmitt 1964: 45 ff. On the Parthian cataphracts: Mielczarek 1993: *passim* – the older, rich literature here.

⁵ Mielczarek 1993: 68; Walbank 1979: 452.

After Antiochus III's reign cataphracts remained a permanent element in the Seleucid army for at least 40 years or so. Almost nothing is known about Seleucus IV's army, yet we know that 1,500 cataphracts (Polyb. 30.25 [Büttner-Wobst]) took part in the parade at Daphne organized by Antiochus IV.⁶ This figure, however, need not signify that the number of cataphracts had been reduced, for only select detachments took part in the spectacle.⁷ It seems worthwhile to mention that the military part of the celebration is possibly connected with preparations for the Parthian campaign of Antiochus Epiphanes – this observation was made by W.W. Tarn and has since been made repeatedly.⁸

In spite of the scarcity of evidence on the subject, it is difficult to doubt the eastern origin of Seleucid cataphracts. Only in the East could the Seleucids recognize the value of this heavy armoured cavalry.⁹ On the other hand it is not clear when and how troops of this type developed among the Parthians. How much did the Parthians contribute to the creation of this type of unit and how essential was the influence of the specific structure of the Parthian army upon its activity?

What we know about the Parthian heavy armoured cavalry called cataphracts, comes first of all from accounts of military confrontations of the Arsacids with Rome.¹⁰ Therefore most data refer to events that happened over 100 years later than Antiochus III's campaign or the Daphne parade.

On the basis of Roman accounts, it is possible to characterize Parthian cataphracts as warriors fighting in close column order; wearing scale armour with additional arm- and leg-defences, using a long spear, which was their only offensive weapon, and riding armoured horses.¹¹ This picture is above all based on Plutarch's description of the cataphracts who fought at Carrhae in 53 B.C. (Plut., *Crass.* 19–25), a description in all probability derived from Nicolaos of Damascus.¹² The few pictorial representations surviving, including the Gotarzes relief from Bisutum, dating to the 1st c. A.D.,¹³ and finds of arms, mostly defensive (above all those from Old Nisa¹⁴) indicate that Plutarch's description accords with reality, though the repertoire of arms and armour was subject to various changes the purpose of which was to protect the warrior and the horse as fully as possible. This is noticeable when we compare Plutarch's descriptions of the cataphracts, probably Parthian, who fought at Tigranocerta in 69 B.C. (Plut., *Lucull.* 27.6, 28.2–5) and at Carrhae in 53 B.C. (Plut., *Crass.* 24.3, 24.5, 25.4).

It is difficult to find corroboration for the presence of similarly armed soldiers in the Seleucid army. This is probably the most important reason for postulating an eastern origin for the warriors who fought as cataphracts on the side of the Seleucids. This proposal is repeatedly made in modern scholarly literature although no supporting evidence can be found in the ancient literary sources.

⁶ Ath. 194 d–f; Walbank 1979: 448–453. See Tarn 1966: 183 ff.; Mørkholm 1966: 97–100; Bunge 1976: 53–71; Mielczarek 1992: 4–12.

⁷ Cf. I Macc. 3.39; Mørkholm 1966: 150–54; Mielczarek 1992: 6; Sekunda 1994: 21.

⁸ Tarn 1966: 183–84.

⁹ See Mielczarek 1993.

¹⁰ Cf. for instance: Schippman 1980: 5 ff.; Wolski 1979: 17–25; Wolski 1983: 137–45; also Mielczarek 1993: 19 ff.

¹¹ Mielczarek 1993: 41 ff.

¹² Peter 1865: 109–12; cf. Adcock 1966: 51.

¹³ See Kawami 1987: 37–43; 157–59.

¹⁴ Pugachenkova 1966: 33–34.

Differences in the arms and armour of troops operating in the east and the west of the Seleucid state is theoretically possible. Some elements of defensive armour found at Ai Khanoum¹⁵ show certain similarities with those of the Parthian cataphracts described by Roman writers. This is also similar to that represented by a bronze figurines of a warrior found in Syria, now in the Louvre,¹⁶ one of them identified by M. Rostovtzeff as “one of the governors or vassals of the Parthian king of the late Hellenistic period”.¹⁷ But the armour from Ai Khanoum and that shown on the Syrian bronze statue are nearly identical with what is shown on the Balustrade Reliefs of the Temple of Athena Polias Nikephoros in Pergamum, dating in all probability to the 2nd c. B.C., though an earlier date has been suggested.¹⁸ There is a consensus of opinion that the Pergamum reliefs show military equipment of the defeated opponents of the Attalids – and thus including the Seleucids. It is fairly easy to discern equipment belonging to warriors who can undoubtedly be regarded as heavy armoured cavalry. In this respects it is worthwhile mentioning Xenophon’s reference to the advantage of a fully armed horsemen.¹⁹

Descriptions of the activities of Parthian cataphracts in the literary accounts of the 1st century B.C. seem to indicate that they fought in close order. Plutarch’s (*Crass.* 25.4) description of the battle of Carrhae and the pictorial evidence, notably the above mentioned Gotarzes relief from Bisutum, show that the long spear was held by the warrior in the right hand along the horse’s flank. This way of using the spear was especially effective against infantrymen, even those armed with a long pike. Later the spear was held across the horse’s neck to the left of its head, allowing the rider to strike his opponent straight on, at a level similar to that at which the weapon was held. This way of holding the lance is confirmed by Parthian iconography, namely the reliefs from Tang-i Sarvak, Firuzabad and elsewhere, dating to the first half of the 3rd century A.D.²⁰

The use of the long spear held along the horse’s flank is documented in representations of Greek horsemen in the times of Alexander the Great. In the battle scene represented on the “Alexander’s Sarcophagus” the king is shown holding a spear along the horse’s flank.²¹ A spear held in the same manner is shown on a coin struck in Babylon representing a symbolic battle scene between Alexander and Porus.²² The horseman shown on coins of Demetrius Poliorcetes, and the Dioscuri shown on coins of Eucratides I (ca 170–135)²³ hold the weapon in a similar way.

It is worthwhile to recall that heavy armoured cavalry drawn up in a wedge-like formation were ineffective against the phalanx, as exemplified by the Achaemenid horsemen (e.g. Arr., *Anab.* 1.15).

Attention should be paid to the fact that the sources all mention cataphract battles with infantry, both those dealing with the activities of Parthian cataphracts at Tigranocerta and Carrhae, and those mentioning the manner of fighting of Seleucid cataphracts. Characteristic

¹⁵ Grenet 1980: 60–63.

¹⁶ Rostovtzeff 1935: 234 and fig. 46; Sekunda 1994: pls. 32–34, and p. 76.

¹⁷ Rostovtzeff 1935: 234.

¹⁸ Jaeckel 1965: 94–122; Lumpkin 1975: 193–208.

¹⁹ Xenophon, *De re equestri*. See Anderson 1970.

²⁰ Mielczarek 1993: 41 ff.

²¹ See von Graeve 1970. Also Markle 1977: 333 ff.

²² Price 1982: 75–85.

²³ Bopearachchi 1991: 2, 4–8, 11–12, 19–21.

in this respect is the battle at Magnesia where the Syrian troops formed a relatively deep and narrow centre with the cataphracts on the wings. Both Livy and Appian (Syr. 37) regard this array as an error on the part of Antiochus III, due, in their views, to his confidence in the role of cavalry in military affairs. As a matter of fact, thanks to this battle order the cataphracts on the right wing of Antiochus III's army were facing one of the Roman legions.²⁴

This seems to prove that Antiochus III correctly regarded cataphracts as a force able to attack even the best infantry.²⁵ This was the result of Antiochus' eastern campaign. According to Justin (41.5), during this war the Parthian army opposing Antiochus III included 100,000 infantrymen and 20,000 horsemen.

Before arms and armour became the main subject of discussion regarding cataphracts, William Tarn suggested that the appearance of the cataphract was the response of the East, where cavalry were dominant arm, to the Macedonian phalanx.²⁶

The strength of this formation was not its equipment, which was a result of the manner of fighting, but its tactics. These demanded excellently trained warriors and horses who would be able to maintain their order during the course of an encounter and to wield a long spear.²⁷ This is evident both at Tigranocerta and at Carrhae.²⁸ The ability of the Seleucid cataphracts to maintain their order at Magnesia is corroborated by Livy (37.40). Unaware of the manner in which the cataphracts fought, he regarded their weapons as weakness in cavalry. In this opinion their equipment was too heavy to enable them to withdraw easily from the battlefield.

Of the two above mentioned characteristics which distinguished the cataphracts from other cavalry units, including other types of heavy armoured horsemen, neither the heavy armour nor the use of the long spear were specific to Parthian cataphracts, and both were certainly not unfamiliar to Seleucid horsemen.

In summary the introduction of cataphracts into the Seleucid army, in all probability effected during Antiochus III's reign, was in practice limited to a change in the manner of fighting of Seleucid heavy armoured cavalry. Both soldiers and horses were trained to fight in close order in a way that would make them able to maintain their order as long as possible. The Parthian element in this was the method of fighting in a close column. However, the new method devised by the Parthians was not easy to employ. In order to make it work it was necessary to change the training of both Greek riders and horses, and this probably meant that the horse harness had to be changed as well.

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²⁴ Bar-Kochva 1976: 71.

²⁵ Cf. Plut., *Lucull.* 28.2.

²⁶ Tarn 1930: 73; Mielczarek 1993: 47–48. Cf. Laufer 1914: 221; Tolstov 1948: 241 ff.; Rubin 1955: 264 ff.; Eadie 1967: 162 ff.; Pugachenkova 1966: 43; Khazanov 1968: 186.

²⁷ Cf. Bar-Kochva 1976: 75 and 253 n. 10.

²⁸ Mielczarek 1993: 41 ff. The older literature on the battle at Carrhae here.

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